

THE MYTH OF THE GERMAN GENERAL STAFF

A Historian Looks at the "Glorious Tradition"

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THE prowess of the German military elite is one of the potent myths of our time. Even while grappling to the death with the famous General Staff, its enemies have imitated and admired it. And its prestige still survives its fall.

German liberals and Russian Bolsheviks, American specialists and British patriots, the man in the street and the scholar in the closet, have agreed to acknowledge the superlative competence of that General Staff. There is in this respect little difference between old and recent writers, between pro-Germans and anti-Germans. We are in the presence of that most immovable of obstacles, a calcified tradition.

Although the Second World War has provided ample occasion and material for a hard second look at that tradition, recent

WHATEVER indignation it may have aroused on moral and political grounds, the German General Staff has always been accepted at its own valuation not only as a model of military wisdom and efficiency, but as a dedicated elite above the sordid business of politics and policy-making, foreign and domestic. That this reputation should have survived two such disastrous defeats as Germany brought upon herself in the two world wars—and that Germany's generals should still claim immunity from any responsibility for the irrational military and political policies that led to these defeats—is at any rate a testimony to the strength of historical myths. SOLOMON F. BLOOM here reexamines the record of Germany's generals under the uncharitable light of historical fact. Mr. Bloom, professor of history at Brooklyn College, is at work on an interpretive history of Europe and the United States in the past two centuries. Mr. Bloom was born in Rumania in 1903 and came to this country in 1920. He has been a frequent contributor to COMMENTARY since the magazine's earliest issues.

writers have not risen to the challenge. Walter Görlitz's *History of the German General Staff, 1657-1945* (Praeger, 508 pp., \$7.50) is illuminating in detail and sufficiently critical in tone, yet is still unable to offer a revaluation of the first premises and the ultimate effectiveness of that institution. Telford Taylor, the American chief of counsel for the prosecution at the Nuremberg trial of war criminals, has published a lively sketch of military politics under the Third Reich (*Sword and Swastika: Generals and Nazis in the Third Reich*. Simon and Schuster, 431 pp., \$5.00), and he comes closer, often, to the heart of the matter, his book being informed by much insight into the social attitudes of the higher German officers. However, Mr. Taylor's canvas is not broad enough to show the whole historical course and the deeper significance of the General Staff.

THE latest book on the subject, *The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945*, (Macmillan, 829 pp., \$12.00), is both more typical and more distinctive than *Sword and Swastika*. Its author is a British historian, John W. Wheeler-Bennett, who has published valuable studies of the Munich Conference and the Brest-Litovsk Treaty of 1918, as well as a keen biography, *Hindenburg: the Wooden Titan*.

Like most writers before him, both critical and uncritical, Mr. Wheeler-Bennett pays homage to the omniscience of the General Staff, even while weaving its story into a threnody of fall and degradation. His book is a graphic account of the relation of the German army to the German state, and particularly to the Nazi party and regime, from the end of the First to the end of the Second

World War. It shows how the generals were cajoled, flattered, and, in the end, outmaneuvered and abased by Adolf Hitler; how only a very few of them were willing to make even a modest open protest; and how, when driven at last to rebellion and assassination, the members of the famed General Staff corps could devise only inept and transparent plots whose climax, the attempt of July 20, 1944, was woefully bungled.

The chief virtues of *The Nemesis of Power* are biographical. Mr. Wheeler-Bennett etches every figure in sharp lines. The book is remarkable in general for its richness of detail as well as for the energy of its style. The author has lived his story and the reader re-lives it with him. Many a thrust lands home. Field Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, for example, so fittingly nicknamed "*Lakeitel*" (a play on the German words for "lackey"—*Lakai*—and "vain"—*eitel*), is dismissed with: "Under Hitler he achieved the rank of Field Marshal, received the highest orders and decorations of the Third Reich, and ultimately attained the gallows. He served well and was well served."

Mr. Wheeler-Bennett's interpretation of the events of the 1920's is generally judicious, and his assessment of conservative and aristocratic policies is sharp but fair. He observes correctly that "the record of the [aristocratic] Nationalist Party in Germany during the Weimar Republic is one of deep dishonor." "There was little at this moment [1941] in Germany's history—there is indeed woefully little today—to indicate that any widespread change of heart has taken place, or that the basic roots of the *furor teutonicus* has been, even partly, eradicated. Some there were in Germany who deeply and sincerely deplored the policies of the Third Reich—a few, a very few, had done so from its very foundation—but these were by no means representative of Germany as a whole."

On the central issue, however, that of the character and tradition of the German General Staff and of its relation to politics—particularly to conservative politics—the author falters. He does not consider, for ex-

ample, how much the attitude of the military in the 1930's was of a piece with that of German conservatives in general. They were all equally "deceived" by Hitler—the von Schleichers and von Hindenburgs as well as the von Papens, the Hugenburgs, and the Schachts. Mr. Wheeler-Bennett's view is that the General Staff was successful as long as it minded its special business. But when the army was "mistaken enough to come down into the arena and to play politics instead of controlling them, it began a descent which only ended in abject defeat—militarily, politically, and spiritually." Having achieved supreme power within the state, the army "threw away the substance for the shadow and became a victim to the Nemesis of this action."

THE traditional efficiency and the exalted *esprit* of the German General Staff arouse in Mr. Wheeler-Bennett the traditional admiration. The "twin genius" of Neithardt von Gneisenau and Gerhardt von Scharnhorst gave body to the formula that "in times of peace, knowledge and education only, and in times of war, outstanding bravery and the capacity for comprehensive understanding, shall constitute claims for the position of officers." Yet the author notes that officers were recruited exclusively from the aristocracy. And though only able aristocrats were chosen as a rule, it is at least arguable whether their attitude and policy were not defined by their origins and affiliation.

The author also subscribes to a commonly held view that "the creation of the Prussian General Staff was an event in military science comparable in importance to the innovation of the ironclad and of aerial and mechanized warfare. Napoleon had revolutionized the science of war but . . . he lacked a highly trained General Staff which could interpret and exploit his genius, and it was to this fact . . . that von Schlieffen attributed the ultimate cause of the Emperor's defeat." "The members of the General Staff corps, an elite within the military caste, were men of high individual ability and an amazing homogeneity of outlook. Governed by an as-

cetic self-discipline, their strength and power lay in their complete self-effacement to the point of anonymity, in favor of the transcending national and political ideal, while at the same time they retained the most complete freedom of expression within the caste on all service matters."

All this is familiar, generally accepted—and highly doubtful. Napoleon did not lose because he lacked a General Staff. It is extraordinary to say that his military genius was not fully exploited: if anything, he did too much with it. Napoleon's difficulties were, like the difficulties of the German General Staff itself, largely political. That staff no more knew what to do after the German army was stalled outside Moscow in 1941 than Napoleon had known what to do when he was stalled inside it in 1812. He had been advised anyway not to thrust himself into the wide and cold Russian spaces. How would a General Staff have helped him persuade Czar Alexander I to come to terms while he waited through those portentous weeks in the Russian city, the weeks that doomed him to a long retreat through snow and ice? And how would a military General Staff have helped him dispose of the sea power of Great Britain?

In assessing the importance of the invention of the Prussian General Staff, it is well to notice that it has lost far more important wars than it has won. It enjoyed a few years of conclusive triumph: against Denmark, with the assistance of Austria, in 1864; alone against Austria in 1866; and alone against France in 1870. These victories became famous, but they cannot hold a candle to the more recent defeats. The question is not how close the German General Staff came to its goal—on that count Hitler did as well—but how great was the distance between goal and forfeit, between ambition and feasibility, not to speak of rationality?

If the latest failure can be blamed, by such leaders as Colonel-General Franz Halder, on Hitler's interference and stupidity,*

*In his angry brochure *Hitler als Feldherr* (Munich, 1949). Halder was chief of the German General Staff from 1938 to 1942.

it cannot be said that Ludendorff allowed anybody to interfere with him during the last years of the First World War. If the defeats are to be debited to the obtuseness of the statesmen, why cannot the victories be credited to their acuteness? It is no secret to anyone that the three victories of the 19th century were due as much to the diplomacy of Chancellor Otto von Bismarck, which kept Russia friendly and presented the Prussian army with one isolated enemy at a time, as to the ability of the General Staff. And the defeats have been due largely to the failure of the military and the statesmen to work together—or rather to their common failure to adjust military action to political realities. It is easier to organize a General Staff—every large country has done it—than to devise a rational foreign policy. A few countries have done that, but Germany is not conspicuously among them. Thus it may be that Bismarck was a greater "invention" than the Prussian General Staff.

The simple fact is that the fields of politics, law, business, industry, and journalism have produced men of greater military ability than all the General Staffs put together. It is enough to compare the effectiveness as "war lords" of the Lincolns, Clemenceaus, Lloyd Georges, Rathenaus, Trotskys, Churchills, and Roosevelts, with that of the von Schlieffens, Ludendorffs, and von Rundstedts, to realize the truth of the matter. If we are going to extol the performance of the overprepared and carefully trained German armies in this century, how shall we praise the underprepared and often improvised armies that prevailed over them in fair combat?

HAVING started off on the wrong foot, Mr. Wheeler-Bennett sets out in the wrong direction. His interpretation compels him to draw a sharp distinction between the "classic" generals (my phrase) and the "political" ones. The "classic" generals were those who upheld the tradition of the army's aloofness from politics, of its perch above parties, of the Bismarckian leaning toward Russia, and of the preference for China over Japan

in Asian politics. Under the "classic" leadership of Helmuth von Moltke, Alfred von Schlieffen, and Hans von Seeckt, the German army went from triumph to triumph. In the 20's and 30's, the von Schleichers, von Blombergs, and von Reichenaus betrayed this tradition, descended into the pit of politics, and took with them the fame and the pride of the German army and its General Staff.

The trouble with a bad theory is that for every question it answers it raises another. It is over-simple to reduce the motives of the German generals, as the author often does, to a passion for medals, promotions, and marshal's batons. As in any human group, there was a wide variation of individual motives and idiosyncracies. Some generals abased themselves less than the Keitels and the Jodls did. But if our author is right in his ascription of venal motives to the latter-day German generals, how are we to account for the startling and sudden degeneration of morale this would symptomatize? And if defeat in the Second World War is to be blamed on the "political" generals, how are we to explain the defeat in the First World War, when the "classic" generals were in undisputed charge? Did the army possess little power even then, or did the "classic" generals undertake deliberately a war on two fronts?

No. The answer lies elsewhere. It lies not in the sudden descent of the army into politics under the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich, but in its inveterate practice of participating in politics on the highest level of policy-making without showing the competence and accepting the responsibility commensurate with that privilege. Under the Hohenzollerns, the Chief of the General Staff, who was the Kaiser's own appointee, had direct access to him over the heads of the chancellor and other civilian ministers, in times of peace as well as war.*

*The General Staff began its career early in the 19th century as a branch of the Prussian war ministry. In a normal parliamentary development, it would have come gradually under civilian control. During the reaction of the Metternich

To be sure, this placed the generals above party politics, and above the need to account for their acts and projects to ministers, Reichstag, or public opinion. But as counselors of the Kaiser, they shared his responsibility for diplomatic and social measures that affected military affairs, and for military decisions that affected domestic or international policy.

To say that because they stood with the Kaiser himself above party politics the generals were above *all* politics, is to say that the Kaiser was also above politics—and responsibility. This would be true in a parliamentary country where monarch, generals, and other specialists were subordinated to civilian leaders, but it was not true in Imperial Germany.

ALTHOUGH in 1918 Germany became a parliamentary republic, the army retained its privileged position. "... for the first time in its history the German army was made responsible to Parliament through a Cabinet Minister who could be questioned in the Reichstag," writes Mr. Wheeler-Bennett. "It was hoped, by this means, to inaugurate parliamentary supervision, to destroy the independent status hitherto enjoyed by the Army and to obviate the dangers of abuses of policy, both internal and foreign, by the chiefs of the Army. Excellent though this idea was in theory, it never worked in practice. Throughout the fifteen years of the Weimar Republic there were but four Ministers of Defence, though there were fourteen Chancellors. Of these the first two, [Gustav] Noske and [Otto Karl]

period, however, the war ministry was restricted by royal fiat to administrative matters, and the Chief of the General Staff, as the highest military counsellor of the Prussian king, became independent of it. This arrangement survived under the Empire. The Constitution of 1871 did not provide for an Imperial, or Federal, ministry of war; indeed, it did not provide for a regular cabinet at all. A secretary of state, subordinate to the chancellor, looked after administrative matters, while the real direction of the army remained in the hands of the Chief of General Staff, who still had direct access to the Emperor, as did all the leading commanders, over the heads of the secretary of state, the Prussian war minister, and the chancellor himself.

Gessler, were civilians who were so much in the hands of their military advisers that, either as dupes or confederates, they served their masters uncomplainingly and in their turn hoodwinked their colleagues in the Cabinet or procured their tacit consent to secret policies of the details of which they themselves were imperfectly informed. Their successors were both Generals, [Wilhelm] Gröner and [Kurt] von Schleicher, who knew very well what was in train and kept the Cabinet informed to just that degree which they considered desirable. Any attempt on the part of members of the Reichstag to elicit information on the activities of the Army was met with evasion, prevarication, or blank refusal. As a result, Hitler, when he came to power, found a firm foundation of rearmament on which to rebuild the German military machine. So much for parliamentary control." It does not seem to have occurred to the leaders of the German army that when they were protecting its independence against other organs and institutions of the state, and asserting its superiority over them, they were engaging in political acts *par excellence*.

Persons who exercise discretion, or who influence policy, are *in politics*, whether they recognize the fact or not. The German military leaders refused to recognize it. To do so would have meant to assume responsibility for their own acts. Responsible authority they feared rather than craved. This applies to the "political" generals of 1939 as well as to the "classic" generals of 1914. In the First World War, Ludendorff exercised all but dictatorial functions, but never assumed the corresponding obligations. The military conspirators against Hitler always leaned for leadership and inspiration on civilians. Even the most political of generals, von Schleicher, the *bête noire* of our author, was notoriously averse to governing directly, and much preferred to work behind the scenes. Is it not indeed remarkable that the most militaristic of modern countries has never throughout its history produced a military dictator, or even a serious candidate for the position?

TO THE end, the high officers pretended to others, and to themselves, that they were specialists without final responsibility either in domestic or foreign matters. This pretense led them to act in spectacular violation of that philosophy of war which is regarded as the most brilliant expression of German military thought. I refer to the philosophy of Karl von Clausewitz, the author of the famous treatise *On War*.

To Clausewitz, war was neither an art nor a science. It was not an independent or autonomous enterprise at all, but simply an instrument of politics. As his well-known phrase puts it, "war is nothing but a continuation of political intercourse with an admixture of other means." Political relations and objectives were not suspended when hostilities began. Divorced from policy, war was "a senseless thing without an object." And policy, properly conceived, must represent "all the interests of the whole community," "all the interests of internal administration and also those of humanity and of whatever else the philosophical mind might bring up."

Expertise, "scientific" laws of war, professionalism, were foreign to Clausewitz's doctrine. There was no "purely military judgment" on military events or plans. "The conduct of war, in its great outlines . . . is policy itself, which takes up the sword instead of the pen, but does not on that account cease to think according to its own laws."

Has anyone described more accurately how Germany, and her General Staff, have *not* waged war? Since the Napoleonic wars, no one like Clausewitz has managed her armies. The author of *On War* was never head of the General Staff; he never led a campaign. For a brief year, in 1813, he was chief of staff of one of the army corps, and for another brief year before his death in 1831 he was chief of staff of an army on the Prussian-Polish border. He has had many admirers at home and abroad, but his worst pupils have been the military leaders of his own country. The most successful of these, Helmuth von Moltke, prided himself on his indifference to politics and broad policy.

Walter Görlitz, in his book, cites a remarkable conversation between von Moltke and the Crown Prince of Prussia during the war of 1870. "The Crown Prince had asked what would happen after Paris had been taken. Moltke replied: 'Then we shall push forward into the South of France in order finally to break the enemy's power.'

"*The Crown Prince*: But what will happen when our own strength is exhausted—when we can no longer win battles?

"*Moltke*: We must always win battles. We must throw France completely to the ground.

"*The Crown Prince*: And what then?

"*Moltke*: Then we can dictate the kind of peace we want.

"*The Crown Prince*: And if we ourselves bleed to death in the process?

"*Moltke*: We shall not bleed to death, and if we do, we shall have got peace in return.

"The Crown Prince then asked whether Moltke was informed about the current political situation, which might perhaps make such a course seem unwise. Moltke replied: 'No, I have only to concern myself with military matters.' "

The legendary von Schlieffen, the planner of the invasion of France and Belgium in 1914, was even more constricted in his views, and even more the exclusively professional man. He did not challenge Germany's anti-British policy in the early years of this century, nor interest himself actively in the implications of the naval race; yet the position of Britain was certainly relevant to Germany's military prospects on the Continent.

Far from thinking, with von Clausewitz, that a policy rooted in the needs of the whole society was essential to rational war-making, the German generals seemed rather to think that politics was a continuation of the kind of wars they preferred to wage, and should reflect the kind of armies they preferred to lead. Ludendorff wrote that "all theories of von Clausewitz are thrown overboard. War and politics serve the survival of the people, but war is the highest expression of the racial will to live." From here it was

a small step to the Nazi view that war, not peace, was the normal state of man. German geopoliticians ceased to refer to peace between wars; it was now "the war between wars."*

WITH the whole conservative class, the German generals stubbornly refused to adjust their attitude to a new industrial society made up in large part of capitalists and proletarians. Such a society called for flexible liberal policies. The generals and aristocrats continued to behave as though they were still managing a community of obedient serfs, servile civil officials, and obsequious peddlers. What had become of von Clausewitz's injunction that policy must represent "all the interests of the whole community"?

Nor did the German generals even face up to the obligations implicit in their professional tasks. Like most entrenched institutions, the General Staff tended to be blind to the virtues of innovation and originality. The French and English introduced air power, tanks, motorized transportation for troops, and industrial and psychological warfare before the Germans did. Civilians like Rathenau and Hitler learned

*Here and there, and after the event, a general caught glimpses of the light. In his *The German Generals Talk*, B. H. Liddell Hart quotes Field Marshal Erwin von Kleist as saying: "Clausewitz's teachings had fallen into neglect in this generation—even at the time when I was at the War Academy and on the General Staff. His phrases were quoted, but his books were not closely studied. He was regarded as a military philosopher, rather than as a practical teacher. The writings of Schlieffen received much greater attention. They seemed more practical because they were directed to the problem of how an army inferior in strength—which was always Germany's position in relation to the whole—could overcome enemies on both sides who, in combination, were superior in strength. But Clausewitz's reflections were fundamentally sound—especially his dictum that war was a continuation of policy by other means. It implied that the political factors were more important than the military ones. *The German mistake was to think that a military success would solve political problems* [my italics]. Indeed under the Nazis we tended to reverse Clausewitz's dictum, and to regard peace as a continuation of war. Clausewitz, also, was prophetically right about the difficulties of conquering Russia."

quicker than the military to follow these leads and to appreciate the value of industrial and mechanical instruments.

What is more important, the generals refused to readjust their thinking to the requirements of a difficult geographic, strategic, and political situation. Germany's alternatives were narrow, her margin of error small. She had no well-defined and defensible frontiers—in this she was hardly unique—but she was also the only great power in Europe that abutted upon all the other great continental powers—specifically Russia, France, and Austria-Hungary. This interior position could be made tenable only by a sober foreign policy, and, given the need of liberal policies at home, by an attitude of friendliness toward the Western powers. As the late German historian, Friedrich Meinecke, remarks, in his *The German Catastrophe* (Cambridge University Press), "only a very carefully considered, very cautious and moderate world policy was possible in this precarious situation. . . . No people had more reason to exercise caution and moderation than the Germans in their shut-in and endangered position and with their tendency to exaggerate ideas which they have once seized upon."

Such a policy did not suit the militancy and adventurousness of the dominant class, its passion for conquest, and its deep-seated unease in the presence of modern ideas. The aristocracy sought to solve its problems by makeshifts.

At home, it imposed a division of functions among the classes that preserved its old monopoly of discretion in administrative, military, and diplomatic affairs. Abroad, it resorted to an alternation of diplomatic and military coups. For the success of such maneuvers, the initiative was essential. Conservative Germany was like a chess player who always had to have the white men. If the initiative should slip to other powers, the real alternative to a moderate policy was revealed: war in all directions.

From the comrade of the Iron Chancellor, the elder von Moltke, onward, the German military chiefs were pessimistic over the pros-

pects of any war on two fronts. But because they had come to look upon themselves as independent, impersonal specialists, they could not insist sufficiently upon a foreign policy that corresponded with the facts of the case as they knew them. What made the generals seem daring was their desire to fight France and Russia as soon as possible, but that was due to their fear that those countries were growing stronger. When disaster came, they lacked the courage to face reality; in 1919, from Hindenburg and Ludendorff down, they shrank from the admission that they had been licked. Mr. Wheeler-Bennett adduces extraordinary instances of the moral cowardice of the "wooden titan," Hindenburg. And in 1939 and 1941, the generals could not bring themselves to face the conclusion that their new venture bore only too close a resemblance to that of 1914.

THE failure, then, of the military elite—the failure indeed of German conservatism in general—derived from the blinking of the need for moderate policies at home and abroad. Ambition was not tethered to the possible. It was this failure on the part of the elite that reduced its wonted science and craft, its efficiency and *expertise*, to gambling. Its alibis are typical of the plunger: if only Lieutenant-Colonel Hentsch had not ordered General von Kluck to wheel in southwards to face Paris, instead of enveloping it, in September 1914; if only Hitler had pulled Field Marshal von Paulus back in time from Stalingrad; if only Britain and the United States had remained innocent bystanders; if, if, if—the speculator's road to ruin is paved with second thoughts and might-have-beens.

It was a deepening habit of gambling that brought the generals close in spirit to their "Nemesis." They now complain that Hitler frustrated their best-laid plans. This may be true in detail and in tactics. But Hitler's grand strategy was, after all, the strategy of their own demigod, von Schlieffen.

As everybody knows, it was von Schlieffen who devised the project for a quick defeat of France by a wheeling movement

through Belgium, and a subsequent campaign against Russia. This plan was from the beginning a reckless gamble. It hung on a brittle chain of assumptions: that the German army had sufficient men to cover an extended front from Switzerland to the English Channel; that supplies could keep up with the hurried advance through Belgium and France; that France could be overwhelmed in a space of six weeks on a schedule timed to the hour; that the Russians would be slow to attack; that if they were not, the political leaders of Germany could afford to sacrifice East Prussia to them temporarily. Hardly any of these assumptions survived the tests of events in September 1914. The very dying injunction of von Schlieffen in 1913—"keep the right wing strong"—was neglected by his successor, the younger von Moltke. What was the likelihood, moreover, that, if the German army did succeed in humbling France in six weeks, it could turn around and bring Russia, too, to her knees? Incompetent and rotten as Czarism was, it persevered through nearly three years of bitter warfare. A second war again exposed the fallacy of this final premise. Von Schlieffen was obsessed with the Battle of Cannae, 216 B.C.E., when Hannibal surrounded a Roman army and annihilated it. For two thousand years generals have yearned to repeat the Carthaginian's masterpiece of strategy. Napoleon Bonaparte delivered a pale imitation of it at Ulm in 1805. Von Schlieffen cast the French and the Russians in the role of the hapless Romans. How could he fail to notice that fourteen years after Cannae Carthage was begging for peace and that half a century later it was razed to the ground? One battle, even a Cannae, does not make a war.

The whole project was, in short, too fine-spun and delicate for a situation such as modern war in which complex and imponderable factors must always enter. The Schlieffen plan was a fine precision machine for slicing jello. The generals, it is true, reckoned risks more scientifically than did Hitler. But there is no science of gambling. They, like Hitler, proceeded on the large hypoth-

esis that modern wars could be fought out in a short time—but it turned out that they are long and wearing. They supposed that initial victory could be decisive—but experience again refuted them. They assumed further that technical military factors could prevail over those of social cohesion, political sophistication, industry, and, above all, slow-working time. They were not alone, of course, in making these assumptions; the generals and statesmen of other countries made them too—but before rather than after the war of 1914. The German leaders were alone in staking so much on views which could not in the nature of things be anything more than conjectures and guesses.

The unrealism charged lately by the generals to Hitler was merely a caricature of their own. It was one of Mr. Wheeler-Bennett's "classic" generals, the "military genius" von Seeckt, who declared after meeting Hitler that "we were one in our aim; only our paths were different." It is customary to regard conservatism, no matter how extreme, as tending toward realism, and even moderate radicalism as tending toward utopia. Yet what was more utopian than the ambition to establish a permanent ruling class of knights—whether traditional or racial—in the modern industrial world! And what could be more unrealistic and petulant than to stake an empire and a civilization on a throw of the military dice!

THE attempt, then, to trace the fall of the military elite to the violation of its *own* best tradition breaks down. Mr. Wheeler-Bennett might have had a closer look at the tradition of that elite, and at that of the German aristocracy as a whole. Seen in the broad perspective of time, these traditions appear as a deepening habit of dissociation from social roots and responsibilities until, finally, ambition and pride became a hunt for mere place and prestige. In 18th-century Germany, the economic and administrative position of the landed aristocracy transcended its military privileges. Gradually, the aristocracy intensified its exploitation of land and labor by adopting the methods, and thereby

reaping the profits, of capitalist enterprise.

Its economic roots, however, were mouldering at the turn of the last century. Agriculture languished while industrial and financial capitalism flourished luxuriantly. No group typified better the impoverished nobleman than the military leaders. Von Moltke, von Waldersee, von Hindenburg, von Seeckt, all sprang from families which had lost their estates, or seen them shrink in size and value. The aristocracy replenished its resources in various indirect ways; it even condescended to marry the daughters of the new princes of wealth. In retreat, it insisted all the more, however, upon its surviving military, diplomatic, and administrative privileges. Just when its bonds with society became loosest did the prestige of the aristocracy reach its zenith, as it found itself ruling over a teeming industrial system.

The crisis came after the First World War. The process of social deterioration was deepened, which had the effect of making the inherited status of the aristocracy all the more vital to it. Its connection with the land had now become largely formal. The generous funds poured by the Weimar Republic into *Osthilfe* kept the Junkers, personally, in cash rather than their estates in repair and solvency. The aristocratic relation to monarchism became more a form of nostalgia than a policy. In a world of rising radicalisms, adventurism, and freebooting, new dangers and strange rivals arose. Hence the aristocrats supported a republic they despised, at the price of secret rearmament; hence they attempted to refashion the republic, when it had served its purpose, into a conservative state; hence they gambled desperately in backing Hitlerism.

Their growing dissociation from modern society accounts for the irrationality and unreality of the aristocrats' policies. Abstract frenzies moved them. From modern society, the military elite borrowed one of its most unfortunate passions: blinkered specialization. The aspirations to professional excellence and prestige that it nursed were disembodied aspirations. Its horizons were narrowed by considerations of technical proficiency and the bookkeeping of man- and horsepower. Its authority stiffened into stance and ritual. Energy and efficiency in the service of irrational aims—such has been the paradox, and the tragedy, of Germany's traditional ruling class. Has not this been the tragedy of Germany altogether?

The fatal marriage of the generals with Hitlerism was the culminating, and entirely consistent, step of a long career of privilege without responsibility, and of leadership without commitment. Their career had run its course within a world against whose spirit and tendency every fiber in their being rebelled. Ringed around by superior forces—superior both materially and spiritually—did they not hope, like Hitler himself, to break through the circle of fire on Siegfried's magic horse?

The generals were in one sense less discerning than their Nemesis. They were not so conscious as Hitler was of the inexorable alternative to failure. They read defeat as a chance for another "deal." They lacked the suicidal pessimism appropriate to their situation. They could not revel, with Hitler, in the desperate prospect of a *Götterdämmerung*.

And so, in the end, Hitler led them in chains down the road they had built for him.